

# John George Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon) Biography

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## Sir John George Woodroffe / Arthur Avalon Biography

*For the one thing that strikes a close reader of his exposition is that*

*he is truly an Indian Soul in a European body ...* (M.P. Pandit: A Commentary on Sir John Woodroffe's: The Serpent Power)  
1865

John George Woodroffe is born in Calcutta on 15 December 1865 to James Tisdall Woodroffe and Florence Hume and baptized at St. Peter's Anglican Church in January 1866. Three brothers and three sisters were born after him.



John Woodroffe, 1928. Portrait by Lafayette. (*Wikipedia*)

John's mother was born in India in a family who had lived in India for several generations. Her father, James Hume, was Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta and a cousin of Alan Octavian Hume, one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress.

1875

Parents convert to Roman Catholicism

1878

John and his brother Francis are sent to Woburn Park, a Catholic

public school near Weybridge in Surrey.

1884

Starts attending University College Oxford, and studies for the Bachelor's Degree in Law, when the famous philologist and orientalist Max Müller was a prominent personality at Oxford around that time.

1888

John Woodroffe obtains the Bachelor of Civil Law degree and one year later joins his father at

the Calcutta Bar where he soon proves himself as an expert on Indian Law.

1894

John's mother dies at the age of forty-eight.

1897

He is made a Fellow of the Calcutta University and appointed Tagore Law Professor.

1898

In collaboration with Sir Sayeed Ameer Ali, a senior Indian judge (and an Indian Muslim nationalist)

Woodroffe writes “The Law of Evidence”, regarded as an authoritative textbook that remained in print for a very long time.

1902

Woodroffe is appointed Standing Counsel to the Government of India.

Marries Ellen Elizabeth Grimson, 25, a concert pianist. She never been to India before marriage. John and Ellen shared a love for classical music and were attracted to Indian philosophy. Like many

artists of the day, Ellen was interested in Theosophy.

1903

His lecture as Tagore Law Professor delivered at the University of Calcutta in 1897, “The Law Relating to Receivers in British India” is published at Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta.

1904

John is promoted to the High Court, the highest judicial administrative body in the state.



Haridev Śāstri, the Sanskrit  
interpreter of the High Court  
introduces Woodroffe to his guru,  
Śivacandra Vidyārṇava, a tantric  
saint.

James Tisdall Woodroffe retires  
from India.





Śivacandra Vidyārṇava

1906

Woodroffe makes a visit to Śivacandra's ashram in Benares and based on descriptions, receives the highest form of initiation – the direct transmission of a state of mystical awareness from guru to disciple.

But as Woodroffe still doubts whether Śivacandra is the right guru for him, Śivacandra tells him to go and search for other gurus.

Accompanied by Haridev Śāstri he meets yogis at Rishikesh, Hardwar, Guptakashi and Darjeeling. Each one tells him that his true guru is Śivacandra. His doubts are dispelled and despite his high social status, he becomes a humbled and devoted disciple.

John and his wife are initiated (*krama*) into the tantric rituals, as recorded in his guru biography. Later, the second initiation (*mahāsamrāj abhiśekha*) was performed by a woman, Jayakāli

Devi, also a Guru of Atal Bihari Ghose.

His friend Ameer Ali recounts that “it was Woodroffe J’s habit after court hours to meditate, bare headed and semi-clothed in an attitude of yoga on the house roof.”

1907

Woodroffe becomes a founding member of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, in which he takes a leading role. He was a close friend with two nephews of Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore,

1908

Woodroffe's father dies.

John Woodroffe's "Civil Procedure in British India: commentary on Act V of 1908", is published in Calcutta.

1911

John Woodroffe and his wife begin studying Sanskrit with Haridev Śāstri, the High Court interpreter.

1913

First books under the name of Arthur Avalon are published.  
Arthur Avalon was a joint

pseudonym of John Woodroffe and his humble friend, Atal Bihari Ghose.

“The Tantra of the Great Liberation” (translation of *Mahānirvāna Tantra*). This text is the only complete original Tantra translation published by Arthur Avalon, and republished in 1952 by Ganesh and Co. with the new title “Introduction to Tantra Sastra.”

“Hymns to the Goddess,” co-authored with his wife, Ellen Woodroffe is published at Luzacs, London.



Atal Bihari Ghose First two books



in the Tantric Texts series are published: “*Tantrābhidhāna*” and “*Ṣaṭ-Cakra-Nirūpaṇa*,” both edited by Tārānātha Vidyāratna, with introductions by Arthur Avalon.

“*Tantrābhidhāna*” was a collection of seven dictionaries. Six of them gave the esoteric meaning of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, while the seventh was a reference book on *mudrās*. By 1922 eleven volumes appear in the Tantrik Texts series. They are mostly in Sanskrit with introduction and summary of contents in English.

"*Ṣaṭ-Cakra-Nirūpaṇa*", the text dealing with *kuṇḍalinī* yoga was later translated in his book, *The Serpent Power*.

1914

March, Śivacandra, Woodroffe's Guru, passes away at age 54. One of Woodroffe's co-disciples, Vasanta Kumar Pal, recounts:

“When Sir John Woodroffe stood up at the [condolence] meeting to speak about Pandit Śivacandra, he was so overcome with grief at the death of his Guru that he was speechless; he could not utter a

single word and tears were streaming from his eyes all the time. Sunk in grief just like a helpless orphan child no word about Śivacandra or any sound except weeping could be heard from him. Seeing him in such a pathetic and tragic state nobody in the meeting that day could restrain their tears as well. Finally, the assembled speakers and other gentlemen there consoled the judge and made him sit on a chair.”

Later he hands over a note to be read that stated: “At one time I was searching for the path of life with a restless mind, wandering hither and thither without direction. I thought desperately: in my search for the true path, who will place me on the ladder to the highest sādhanā? I felt deep in my heart that there was no guru to be found in this life and with that thought I could find no rest. At that very moment the man who first showed me the path and whose company – the company which was blessed by the gods – calmed my mind and

directed it to the path of self realization (ātmacaitanya), saved me from utter destruction. To that man, the great man amongst all men, the king among all the kings, my guru, God's gift to humanity, Śivacandra, to the feet of that person I offer all my humble prayers and humble offerings. Blessed be the guru. “ (Baśumati, weekly journal, 1914)

Principles of Tantra (*Tantratattva*, vol. 1 & 2) authored by Śivacandra is published, translated from Bengali by Jñānendralal Majumdar

and with preface and introduction by Arthur Avalon.

January, volume 3 of Tantrik texts is published under the title "*Prapañcasāra Tantra*", edited by Tārānātha Vidyāratna, with introductions by Arthur Avalon.

1915

August, volume 4 of Tantrik Texts is published: "*Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*" – edited by Girish Chandra Vedāntatirtha, with introduction by Aksay Kumar Maitra.

Woodroffe is knighted and also becomes Chief Justice.

1917

His admirers publish Bhārata Shakti, a book containing a collection of Woodroffe's short writings, talks and speeches on Indian cultural nationalist subjects, compiled and edited by Nolini Mohun Chatterji. Woodroffe states that "India is not a mere geographical Expression ... India is an Idea. It is a particular Śakti, the Bhārata Śakti, distinguished from all others by Her own peculiar

nature and qualities.” Three editions are published until 1921.

Woodroffe writes to Lama Kazi Dawasamdub about his intention to retire and leave India as soon as the European war would be over.

Two translations are published: “Wave of Bliss (*Ānandalaharî*)” and “Hymn to Śiva” (*Mahimnastava* of Puṣpadanta).

“*Īshā Upanishad*” (with commentary of Sadānanda ) is published at Luzacs, London.



Volume 5 of Tantrik Texts,  
“*Kulārnava Tantra*” (The Ocean of  
Kula) is published, edited by  
Tārānātha Vidyāratna, with  
introductions by Arthur Avalon.

Volume 6 of Tantric Texts 6  
“*Kālivilāsa Tantra*,” edited by  
Pārvati Carana Tarkatirtha is  
published, with introductions by  
Arthur Avalon.

1918

“Is India Civilized?” is published,  
where he makes a eulogy of the  
Hindu spiritual heritage that gave

India a special role in the modern world.

In April is published “*Śhakti and Śhākta*,” the first book under the name of Sir John Woodroffe. The book is a compilation of talks and magazine articles, where Tantra is presented as *śaktivāda*, the doctrine of *Śakti*.

In September, after five years of work, under Arthur Avalon pseudonym is published “The Serpent Power – being the *Ṣaṭ-Cakra-Nirūpaṇa and Paduka-Pancaka*”, the book that introduced

*kuṇḍalinī* yoga to the Occident.  
(Ṣaṭ-Cakra-Nirūpaṇa: Description of  
the Six Centers, Paduka-pancaka:  
The Fivefold Footstool).

Volume 7 is published of the  
Tantrik texts series consisted of a  
partial translation of a Tibetan  
text, “*Demchog Tantra*” (sk: *Śrī-  
Cakra-Sambhāra Tantra*) edited by  
Lama Kazi Dawasamdub and with  
foreword by Arthur Avalon.

Around that time Lama Kazi  
Dawasamdub also tried to  
persuade Western collaborators to  
publish “Tibet’s Great Yogi

Milarepa;” Woodroffe was among them, but he was not interested.

Tantrik texts volume 8, “*Tantrarāja Tantra*” in two volumes was devoted to the *śrī vidyā* school of Kaulism, edited by Laksmana Śāstri, introduction by Arthur Avalon.

1919 The second edition of “Is India Civilized?” is published in April, the same month when Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar happened.

In June Woodroffe becomes a patron of Indian Rationalistic

Society.

His lecture 'The Gāyatrī as an Exercise of Reasoning' is published in the September edition of the Rationalistic Society bulletin and reprinted in Garland of Letters.

1922

On September 1st, Woodroffe retires from the High Court.

During a ceremony he receives a silver scroll recognizing his work and personality: " ... you have by your suavity of manners, your attainments, and above all your

sympathy with the people of this country, earned the esteem and gratitude of all who came in contact with you...

... The Indian Society of Oriental Art ... will bear testimony to your solicitude in the cause of the neglected arts and crafts of the East and of Indian painting and sculpture. In the domain of religious philosophy, your labours have removed the ignorant obloquy from the Brahmanic Scriptures known under the name of the Tantras, and the erudition

and scholarship you have brought to bear upon your exposition of this abstruse subject ...

... we cannot omit mentioning [your] fearless impartiality with which you repelled the aspersions cast on the civilization of India, with its historic past, and the thoroughness with which you have done it.” (The Statesman, Calcutta, September 1st, 1922)

Woodroffe returns to England. Accounts of his son James and the daughter of his friend E. B. Havell picture him as a silent, unhappy

person apparently due to family tensions and sicknesses.

Three more works in the Tantric Texts series are published:

Tantric Texts 9, "*Kārpūrādistotram*" (Hymn to Kālī by Mahākāla)

Translated by Arthur Avalon;

Tantric Texts 10 "*Kāmakalāvilāsa*" of Pūnyānanda Editor: MMP

Sadāśiva Miśra. Translation and notes by Arthur Avalon;

Tantric Texts 11 Kaula and other Upanishads Commentary by Bhaskararaya, editor Śitārāma



Śāstri introduction by Arthur Avalon.

The World as Power is published as a series of essays, the second book under the name of John Woodroffe.

The Garland of Letters appears under the name of Sir John Woodroffe, based on series of articles previously published in 1917 and 1918 called Studies in the *Mantra Shāstra*. Woodroffe acknowledges the help of his friend, P.N. Mukhopadhyay a philosophy professor at that time,

and later known as guru Swami Pratyagatmanand Saraswati. The preface is signed J.W, Konaraka, 22nd April 1922.

1923

Serves as Reader in Indian Law to the University of Oxford until 1930.

1925

Barbara, the younger Woddroffes' daughter dies of anorexia at age eighteen.

October 3rd, at Oxford, John Woodroffe writes a foreword titled "The Science of Death" to 'The

Tibetan Book of the Dead”,  
translated by Lama Kazi  
Dawasamdub and edited by W. Y.  
Evans-Wentz.

1926

Tantric Texts 12 "*Tantrarāja  
Tantra*" Part 2, editor Sadāśiva  
Miśra, introduction and summary  
by Arthur Avalon is published.

1927

Woodroffe writes the foreword to  
V. G. Rele, “The Mysterious  
Kuṇḍalinī.”

1928

Volumes 13 to 15 of Tantric Texts  
are published, with Arthur Avalon  
as the editor:

*“Mahānirvāṇa Tantra,”*

*“Kaulāvalīnirṇayah,”* a compilation  
by Jñānānanda Paramahansa,

*“Brahmasaṃhitā”* and *“Viṣṇu  
Sahasranāma”*.

1930

Woodroffe retires to the south of  
France.

1933

Tantric Texts 16/17 "*Śāradātilaka*,"  
edited in two volumes with a  
summary in English, was a 'mantra  
digest' by Lakṣmanadeśika, a śaiva  
religious leader of the Kashmir  
school. Editor and introduction by  
Arthur Avalon.

1935

Tantric Texts 18/19 "*Prapañcasāra  
Tantra*" (The Essence of Visible  
World) of Śaṅkarācārya, editor and  
introduction by Arthur Avalon.

John Woodroffe is re-baptized in  
the Catholic church.

1936

Atal Bihari Ghose, the alter-ego of Arthur Avalon, dies on January 12, 1936,

Four days later, suffering of Parkinsons's disease, John Woodroffe dies at Beausoleil, near Monte Carlo, on January 16, 1936

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